

State of the University Series: FSU's Women

THE STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY SERIES WILL EXAMINE A DIFFERENT ISSUE OR GROUP OF PEOPLE EVERY WEEK THROUGHOUT THE FALL SEMESTER. THOUGH SOME OF THESE TOPICS STEM FROM NATIONAL OR WORLDWIDE ISSUES, THEY ALL IMPACT THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. FOR THE SECOND ARTICLE IN THE SERIES, THE FSVIEW SPOKE WITH THE WOMEN OF FLORIDA STATE TO ASK THEM WHAT THEIR LIVES ARE LIKE AND HOW THEIR VIEW THEIR CHANCES AT SUCCESS IN THE WORLD OF ACADEMIA.

Lily Henkel, Digital Media Editor

The State of the University Series will examine a different issue or group of people every week throughout the fall semester. Though some of these topics stem from national or worldwide issues, they all impact the Florida State University community in one way or another. For the second article in the series, the FSView spoke with the women of Florida State to ask them what their lives are like and how their view their chances at success in the world of academia.

The feminist movement is one that has spread across international borders in campaigns like He For She, in anthems like "Who Run The World" and "Flawless" led by Queen Bey herself, and it has even graced our Netflix streaming in documentaries such as Free The Nipple. Spurring from these movements have been constant waves of strong, male and female feminists who have emerged in support of equality for all genders and have made the change from sexist to feminist the popular decision of our generation. While there can always be room for improvement, Florida State University has effectively changed alongside the rest of the world in the effort to create equal opportunities for women and men on campus so that they can fight for equal opportunity within their fields as alumni.

Within academia, there is a widely circulated belief that there are a higher percentage of men in science, technology, engineering, and math, or STEM, programs than women. Although this is likely true for many universities, it is quite the opposite for Florida State. For example, according to FSU President John Thrasher, our College of Medicine currently holds one of the most diverse groups in the country, and more than half of the newest class of medical students is female.

“If [women] want to achieve, this is the place to be, in my opinion,” states President Thrasher. “We have fantastic programs in almost every area. We also have a foundation in liberal arts, and a lot of women apply themselves to those programs and they are the strongest as any place in the country.”

The increase in the female student population can be attributed to the incredible amount of female leaders who play an integral role in FSU’s faculty: They serve to inspire and teach young women to have ambition in any field they choose and to succeed in the process.

“I look at my own staff: Our provost is a female, our general counsel is a female, our vice president of student council is a female, and our vice president of student affairs is a female,” says President Thrasher. “I think women are well-served in this campus, which is why I was excited my granddaughter decided to come here.”

In addition to noticing women in positions of such importance within the rankings of the faculty and administration, students are offered special opportunities to learn more about what professional careers are like for women by the women in the fields themselves. For example the Center for Leadership & Social Change has several programs specifically targeted toward helping marginalized identities seek support and mentorship.

Such programs are very highly spoken of by Stephanie Urbina, C.A.R.E. ambassador and student assistant at the center. Though she entered Florida State headstrong and driven toward success, she admits that the female role models that she met through the center’s programs is what made her realize her dreams are possible to achieve.

“You just get surrounded by campus leaders who are all women, even leaders in Tallahassee, and [the programs] allow you to connect with them and stay in contact with them as the years go by,” explains Urbina. “They know what it’s like to be a woman and they really help you out.”

When students share an identity with their professors and faculty members, a new environment and atmosphere is created – one where inhibitions are left at the door and a sense of understanding drives the learning experience.

“I think it boils down to representations. If there isn’t anyone that looks like me in a room, that just kind of sets the tone and makes me more inclined to stay quiet,” remarks Urbina. “As opposed to when I do see a woman leader in a position where you might usually see a man,



Mary Coburn, FSU's Vice President of Student Affairs, in her office on the school's campus Tuesday, March 22, 2016.

(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

it inspires me to think, 'Yes, I can do this. I can apply for this job and actually get it.'"

With the majority of students being female, and with such a large number of female faculty and administration members, Florida State has managed to become the example for other organizations and universities on the positive impact of providing equal opportunity.

However, there are still some facets of Florida State that remain male-dominated.

For undergraduate Celli Horstman, experiencing a well-balanced classroom led by a male professor or graduate student has become the norm as she pursues a degree in political science and a minor in statistics. Horstman has noticed this male-heavy faculty stands in stark contrast with her almost exclusively female graduates and professors teaching her women's studies courses.

Horstman concludes that the women in disciplines like political science and statistics, like the women she sees in her classes, must be leaving FSU to jump right into the workforce rather than remaining in the programs to work on higher degrees.

"The nonprofit I work for, all my supervisors are women – it's almost all women, actually," says Horstman. "Also, over the summer, I had an internship at a state department that was also almost all women. What I'm seeing is that [women] are going into the workforce rather than staying as professors, but the men are staying as professors."

So the question arises, why is it that some degrees at FSU, despite maintaining a diverse undergraduate student body, seem to have an overwhelming majority of males in the higher levels of academia?

"One thing that's kind of notorious with research is that it can be very male dominated just because of how quickly research moves. I think there's this idea that men are more aggressive and they are willing to get their work out there more quickly than women," proposes Horstman.

Whether or not this is, in fact, the real cause of such a majority of men over women becoming involved in research on campus, the concept alone creates an alarming stigma. If you are a woman who dreams of entering what is already a male dominated field of research, it is nothing but discouraging to also feel the pressure to overachieve and prove oneself. Stigma or not, Horstman has noticed a trend among her peers that may expose a correlation between the length of a program and the number of females enrolled.

"A lot of different grad student that I've worked with that are women, they are also mothers as well, so I think that's also contributing to women not choosing to go on at FSU past undergrad," says Horstman. "A lot of my friends have shared



Student Body Vice President celebrates her Advance Party win - and her birthday - on SGA election day this year.

(Photo: Brandon Buck/FSView)

with me their concerns about how motherhood is going to play in to their careers and are [worrying about] if their career path is going to have to be altered, so they feel like they have to decide between the two.”

Deciding between motherhood and a professional career seems like a problem women would have dealt with decades ago, but not now – not in the progressive, feminist world of 2016. Yet somehow, one could argue all women in academia can identify with the debacle of planning a family around planning a higher-level degree and a professional career.

“Research is so time consuming, especially if you are doing it at the academic level. For example, if you are doing research at FSU, you are also teaching classes, and through the teaching of classes you have students coming to you with questions and you’re expected to do all the other things as a grad student,” explains Horstman. “So motherhood, or even just being married, can add on to that burden as well, and it can take away from the academic experience.”

But of course, women are and should be expected to complete the same rigorous and extensive program as men to receive the same degree at the end; anything else wouldn’t be fair. However, in a world where the pressures and health benefits of beginning a family at a young age may complicate the academic path of a woman, there must be ways that the university can attempt to accommodate their goals outside of the university.

The answer lies in the options by which a degree can be obtained, and the next step would be to test out these options to see if they lead to a higher female, and generally more diverse, population of students.

“I think it’s how the programs are developed: Are they developed with family in mind? Are they developed so that students can have careers while they are doing their masters? So it’s very different with each type of program but I think that the length of the program definitely makes a difference,” states Horstman.

Another popular option that FSU offers for many of its upper-level degree-seekers is the option to take courses online rather than in class. With a greater variety of strategies to take on the load of a graduate program, it is inevitable that a more diverse population of students will feel inclined to enroll – especially women.

While pushing for more options for all graduate programs is something FSU could work on, Florida State is leading other universities in the ways that it prioritizes equal opportunity for all students.

“There are so many opportunities to be successful on this campus, for women and men, but the larger part of our new 6200 freshmen this year are women,” says President Thrasher. “And I think the women who are coming through here and graduating are getting good jobs or going on to graduate school or law school or something else.”



Kimora Williams, left, is presented the Garnet and Gold Scholar Society medal from Florida State University’s Vice President for Student Affairs Mary Coburn.

(Photo: Bill Lax/FSU Photography Service)